



## Report briefer and executive summary

November 2008

### Village Agency: Rural rights and resistance

Incorporating the voices of villagers into the political processes that affect them

Despite ongoing debates, efforts to address immediate humanitarian and human rights concerns in Burma are not mutually exclusive. Villagers in rural Burma have already worked to address these interconnected issues on their own initiative. The Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG), in its *Village Agency* report highlights the strategies that villagers use to resist human rights abuses. These measures also comprise some of the most effective means currently employed to address locally-perceived humanitarian and socio-economic concerns. In the *Village Agency* report, KHRG argues for a rights-based approach to engagement mindful of on-the-ground human rights implications. Such an approach requires that villagers be given the opportunity to speak for themselves about the abuses they face and the efforts they employ to resist these abuses.

In areas of Karen State under State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) control, villagers have regularly condemned the various forms of forced labour, arbitrary taxation, looting and other ad hoc demands; restrictions on movement, trade and agriculture; threats and violence used to enforce compliance; and the harmful consequences of such exploitative governance on poverty, malnutrition, ill health, and access to education, healthcare and other social services. In response, villagers have employed techniques including negotiation, bribery, lying, outright refusal, confrontation, various forms of discreet false compliance, jokes and counter-narratives, and temporary evasion in order to reduce or wholly evade compliance with exploitative demands and the restrictions which facilitate them.

In areas not under SPDC control, villagers have denounced the Burma Army's shoot-on-sight policy; burning of food stores, agricultural fields, plantations, homes, schools, churches and other village structures; and blocking of all travel and trade (including of food and medical supplies) into, out of and within non-SPDC-controlled areas. With these efforts, the Burma Army has sought to force civilians to move into military-controlled villages and relocation sites. In response villagers have adopted strategies including:

- Establishing hiding sites in preparation for expected displacement
- Hiding food stores in the forest
- Monitoring troop movements and employing advanced warning systems to alert villagers to approaching army patrols
- Retrieving food and other supplies left behind at villages during flight
- Cultivating covert agricultural fields
- Establishing temporary 'jungle markets' to covertly trade with villagers from SPDC-controlled areas
- Sharing food with friends and family
- Utilising locally-available foods and medicine
- Accessing indigenous organisations providing aid cross border from Thailand
- Providing community education and social services  
Assisting family and community members in the daily challenges of life in hiding

This document is a summary of KHRG's full report *Village Agency: Rural rights and resistance in a militarized Karen State*. The report comprises information and direct testimonies collected from over 110 interviews conducted with local villagers in rural Burma. The report highlights the strategies villagers use to resist abuse and provides recommendations to the international community on effective and accountable forms of engagement. The full report in digital format is available online at [www.khrg.org](http://www.khrg.org). Printed copies may be obtained by sending a request to [khrg@khrg.org](mailto:khrg@khrg.org).

Despite the success of these resistance strategies, they have been largely missed by international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) and UN and bilateral aid agencies seeking to address humanitarian and socio-economic concerns in Burma. Nevertheless, they present important opportunities for external actors engaged in humanitarian, development, diplomatic, advocacy or other work to operate more accountably to local communities and in a manner mindful of the on-the-ground human rights implications of any external intervention. The following recommendations provide immediate and concrete examples of how the voices of villagers in rural Burma can, and indeed should, be heard and incorporated into the many ongoing political processes affecting them.

### Conducting human rights impact assessments

Despite the SPDC's efforts to control and restrict international agencies, there is a great need for increased international donor and logistical support for humanitarian and socioeconomic development projects in rural Burma. However, INGOs, as well as UN and bilateral agencies, need to be wary of the SPDC's attempts to co-opt externally-funded relief and development projects and the potentially harmful human rights impact of such co-option (which may occur without the knowledge of expatriate staff).

Given the above risks, it is imperative that aid agencies operating in Burma ensure that their projects neither contribute to abuse nor undermine the efforts which local communities employ to resist abuse. The

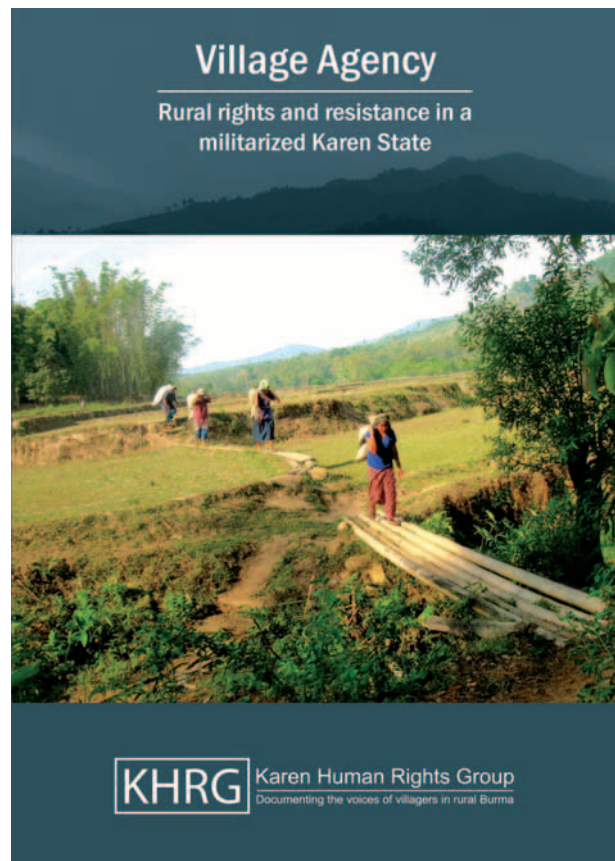


Photo: KHRG

most effective way to ensure this is through the use of human rights impact assessments which allow in-depth, uncensored and qualitative input from local communities regarding any potential harm or benefit to human rights resulting from a given project.

#### Key Recommendations

- Conduct **human rights impact assessments** as an integral part of all humanitarian and socio-economic development programmes implemented by international NGOs and UN agencies operating in Burma
- Support, through funding and capacity building, **independent civil society** groups in rural areas under the control of the SPDC and ethnic ceasefire groups
- Increase assistance by international governments, funding bodies and NGOs to indigenous organisations delivering '**cross-border**' aid to local communities in Burma
- Incorporate **locally-driven civilian protection** measures into ongoing humanitarian relief and development programmes currently being implemented by international NGOs and UN agencies via Rangoon
- Introduce the **concerns and suggestions of rural villagers**, via explicit testimonies, into foreign policy discussions, round tables and think tanks
- Include the voices of rural villagers in ongoing international **journalism and advocacy** efforts



Photo: KHRG

### **Strengthening independent civil society**

Through grassroots networking and support for civilian interests outside of State power relations, civil society offers an opportunity for local ownership of social change. Furthermore, such support networks potentially allow for the discreet strengthening of villagers' efforts to resist State abuses. These groups can also play a role as an alternate seat of power, responding to locally perceived needs and serving to strengthen the social capital needed for long-term peace-building and democratisation.

International humanitarian and development agencies should seek to strengthen independent local civil society networks through direct funding, logistical support and capacity building. Such external support for civil society should also reach areas under the control of ethnic ceasefire groups as well as mixed administration areas (where both SPDC and ceasefire groups operate).

### **Supporting aid delivered cross-border**

Assistance for civil society groups operating in areas controlled by the SPDC and ethnic ceasefire groups must not be seen as an alternative to supporting indigenous organisations operating via non-SPDC-controlled areas and often getting logistical support

cross-border from Thailand or other countries. As these groups have expanded and developed since the early 1990s, they now provide extensive and crucial assistance in health, education, nutrition and livelihood support for disparate communities across large areas of Burma (far beyond the country's immediate 'border regions' and often in areas inaccessible to Rangoon-based INGOs). Furthermore, local groups providing assistance in this way have greater freedom than those under State control to address civilian concerns divergent from the SPDC agenda, to support civilian efforts to resist abuse by local authorities and to operate with greater accountability and responsiveness to local communities. Such 'cross border' aid groups should be targeted for increased financial and logistical assistance.

### **Incorporating civilian protection into humanitarian relief and development programmes**

On-the-ground civilian protection, in terms of practical measures taken to ensure that individuals obtain their rights, is something that can and must be effectively incorporated into all humanitarian and development programmes implemented in Burma.

In Karen State, and other parts of rural Burma, local strategies to resist abuse are the most effective protection measures currently employed. As such, the

key to effective implementation of any civilian protection mandate by international humanitarian or development agencies is direct and tangible support for villagers' own resistance efforts. International aid agencies must also ensure that other aspects of their humanitarian, development and protection work, through their strategies of delivery and civilian registration requirements, neither pressure local communities into submitting to abusive forms of State authority, nor undermine the resistance efforts which local communities already employ on a daily basis.

### **Including villagers' concerns and suggestions in foreign policy planning**

In recognition of the current limits of foreign policy on Burma, a number of conferences have recently been held by governments, universities and international NGO networks to discuss and debate innovative ways to encourage positive change in the country. While such discussions can be potentially productive, it is crucial that the voices of Burma's overwhelmingly rural and agrarian population be included. If it is unreasonable, for logistical or other reasons, to expect the attendance of villagers from rural Burma at international roundtables on Burma policy, more effort can be made to canvas the views of rural communities residing in their home areas (or, at the very least, to study the reports of and communicate with those organisations that already do this) prior to such events so that villagers' views on issues can be included and discussed.

### **Incorporating local voices into international journalism and advocacy**

International journalism and advocacy on contemporary Burma can play an important role in presenting a more comprehensive picture of the current situation; one which elaborates on the context in which abuses occur and challenges harmful stereotypes of villagers as helpless victims. This can be achieved by incorporating the perspectives and concerns of rural villagers into news articles and advocacy campaigns, including the direct statements of these individuals within these same accounts, increasing the focus on systematic exploitation



Photo: KHRG

and highlighting the efforts which rural villagers have employed on their own initiative to resist abuse and claim their rights. There also needs to be a concerted effort to advocate for the direct participation of villagers themselves in the ongoing political processes which affect them and their communities.



The above recommendations comprise just some of the immediate applications of a Village Agency perspective. As the situation in Burma evolves, future applications include allowing refugees a seat at the table for any potential repatriation negotiations and including internally displaced persons (IDPs), refugees and other affected communities in peace negotiations between armed groups and the SPDC.

The opportunities for engagement presented here as well as the broader context of abuse and resistance in rural Karen State are examined at greater length in KHRG's *Village Agency* report. The overall argument of the report is that the far-too-often-excluded voices of rural villagers must be included in the political processes that affect them and their concerns must shape any related intervention. By recognising that politically-engaged forms of intervention, supportive of villagers' ongoing resistance strategies, need not focus on regime change (nor wait until one has occurred), international approaches to Burma's current political and humanitarian challenges can hopefully progress beyond the contentious debates in which they have been caught.

The Karen Human Rights Group (KHRG) was founded in 1992 and documents the situation of villagers and townspeople in rural Burma through their direct testimonies. KHRG operates independently and is not affiliated with any political or other organisation. All KHRG reports are available online at [www.khrg.org](http://www.khrg.org). KHRG can be contacted by email at [khrg@khrg.org](mailto:khrg@khrg.org).